

## African World View and Religion\*

13 Man lives in two worlds; the natural-physical and the social-cultural. He tries to comprehend the nature of his total environment and in doing so forms an integrated image of both worlds in relation to himself. This image is commonly called a world view and influences an individual's actions. No matter how strange or irrational the behavior of a person, an ethnic group, or a nation may seem to the outsider, it makes sense in terms of the world view of that person, ethnic group, or nation. One way to better understand a culture or society is to perceive it from the intellectual and emotional standpoint of the individual participant, to examine what members of a community know, feel, and do and what motivates their actions.

### African World View

The diversity of the social and cultural environments under which various African groups live and the variety of geographic conditions found in Africa make it impossible to speak of *one* inclusive world view characteristic of *the* African. However, the uniform social and cultural conditions shared by some groups, particularly those living in what is called a "culture area," give rise to strong similarities in the way in which members of these groups will view their world.

How a person views his world is determined by several factors: the social and cultural conditions under which he lives (family, economy, power structure, <p. 209> religion); the physical environment (semidesert, rainforest, animals and plants); his past experiences; his wants and goals; and his physiological structure and condition (weak, strong, healthy, sick). The more stable these determinants are in a community, the more alike will be the world views of its members.

The influence of social and cultural factors on the development of the world view of an individual is crucial. A child is born with the potential to participate fully in the life of the community in which he or she is being raised. During the early stages of life, and particularly prior to the effective acquisition of language, many of a child's cognitions develop through direct experience and observation of both the physical and social environment. However, a great deal of what a person knows, particularly in traditional cultures, is acquired from other members of the community, either directly through instruction or indirectly through his imitation of the actions of others.

A young person among the Kung, for example, grows up within the family, the only social unit larger than the family is an autonomous band composed of several families and led by a headman. The child becomes aware of the physical features of the people and the roles each member must play within the group. The hot, semiarid physical environment, with its seasonal rainfall, its thunderstorms, and its drought-resistant vegetations, and a country covered with grass, brush, and scant small trees are all perceived. The young person recognizes a variety of wild plants, berries, and roots as edible and a certain type of plant gum as a delicacy. A number of dangerous animals--lions, leopards, and hyenas--are also identified, as are a variety of big antelopes found in the region: wildebeest, springbok, eland, and so forth. One animal, the gemsbok, a gray antelope with spectacular black markings, is particularly admired, and is taken as a model according to which young girls are scarified on the legs, thighs, and buttocks for beauty.<sup>1</sup>

The San live under open skies; the sun and the moon are a constant part of their existence and figure importantly in their world view. They are well-adapted to the harsh environment and view the world as a mixture of good and evil forces which must be attracted or driven off. The cognitions of the San differ from those of the Mbuti pygmies, who inhabit the Ituri Forest in Central Africa. Although both groups live by hunting and gathering, a techno-economic system which gives rise to similar social organization in the two societies, the difference in their respective physical environments results in different world views.

The Mbuti child learns about the physical environment: the forest, with its dense vegetation and towering trees, the abundance of game and other forest

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\*Endnotes in the original were converted to footnotes in this edition].

<p. 210> products--mushrooms, nuts, roots, fruits, and wild honey. The young boy learns about the limits of the hunting grounds for his band and about his family's trading partners among neighboring village-dwellers, with whom the Mbuti exchange forest products, especially meat and hut-building materials, for produce of the village. The Mbuti are well adapted, both physically and socially, to living in the dark, sunless forest, for it is their source of livelihood, well-being, and protection. The forest is benevolent; it is the life-giver. Exposure to the sun, or moving away to a nearby village, causes a deterioration in health. Heavenly phenomenon are little known to the pygmy; the forest is dark, and therefore darkness is good.

Cultural adaptations determine the extent to which a group can cope with its physical environment. The Mbuti view of the forest differs radically from that of village-dwelling neighbors who live by "slash-and-burn" horticulture. In contrast to the pygmy, the villager views the dark forest as the abode of evil forces which reluctantly refuse to surrender any agricultural land while supporting other dense vegetation. The villagers attribute misfortunes to a variety of hostile agents, which they confront with magic, witchcraft, and sorcery. The pygmies, on the other hand, in accordance with their overall view of a benevolent world, never apply any of the villager's techniques to coerce the forces around them. For the pygmies, there is no evil spirit to confront or countervail.<sup>2</sup>

A single cognition does not occur independently. The separate cognitions of the individual develop into clusters which in turn, are interconnected and joined into larger systems of knowledge. These add meaning to single cognitions and form parts of the image of the world that members of the social group perceive. Cognitive systems (for example, religious, familial, political) interconnect with one another and form an integrated view of the world.

When a person encounters a strange element which is not a part of the known system, the entire cognitive process is seriously impaired. New elements are seen in terms of what is already known; this is a universal characteristic of human thinking. The relating of the Shakespearian drama of Hamlet to the Tiv of central Nigeria is an interesting example of this phenomenon. The story begins with the *ghost* of a murdered king appearing to some friends, then to his son Hamlet and informing him about the murderer. The world view of the Tiv does not include the concept of a *ghost* of a dead person. The Tiv do not believe in the survival of any part of a person after his death. They believe, however, that witches can raise a corpse and send omens to warn of coming events. Thus, a Westerner reports the following episode, which began with a question from an old man in the audience:

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"What is a 'ghost'? An Omen?"

"No, a 'ghost' is someone who is dead but walks around; people can hear him and see him, but not touch him."

They objected. "One can touch zombies."

"No, no! It was not a dead body the witches had animated to sacrifice and eat. No one else made Hamlet's dead father walk. He did it himself."

"Dead men can't walk," protested my audience.

I compromised: "A 'ghost' is a dead man's shadow."

But again they objected. "Dead men cast no shadows."

"They do in my country," I snapped.<sup>3</sup>

As pointed out earlier, the world view of an individual is composed not only of intellectual, cognitive knowledge but of emotional, affective components as well. When these emotional components are added to cognitions or knowledge, a tendency to act or behave in a certain way arises. These three components, cognition, emotion, and action tendency, make up what is called an attitude. The acquisition of knowledge and how this knowledge develops into an attitude through social interaction, is illustrated by Camara Laye, a Malinke writer from Guinea, in describing his first encounter with a snake.<sup>4</sup> As a child of only six or seven exploring the environment immediately outside the home, he encountered the snake. He toyed with it and observed its characteristics, especially its fangs. An adult snatched him away and the event aroused a great commotion. Camara Laye observed that his mother was shouting hardest of all and gave him "a few sharp slaps." Later she warned him solemnly never to play with snakes again. The reaction of adults to a child's encounter with a dangerous object generates a tense emotional atmosphere readily perceived by the child; the tension is reinforced by the physical punishment. The mother's warning never to play with snakes again designates the direction for future action. Thus, a negative attitude toward snakes is instilled in the child.

Attitudes develop around specific objects in each person's world. They can concern the physical environment,

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family, economy, education, politics, religion, or art. The entire concept of kinship, for example, which is the central factor for social organization in African societies, revolves around institutionalized sets of characteristic attitudes toward the members of the kinship group. In an Ashanti family, a distinctive set of attitudes govern the relationship between a son and his father, his mother, and his mother's brother that is, the boy's maternal uncle). This set of attitudes is congruent with another set, the relationship among a man, his sister, and his wife. "To his sister a man entrusts <p. 212> weighty matters, not to his wife. He will give his valuables in her care, not into his wife's ... [The sister is often] a watchdog of a wife's fidelity."<sup>5</sup>

Attitudes group together into clusters and systems which characterize the behavior of an individual. Since most attitudes are learned within the context of living within a specific community, members of that community exhibit the same attitudinal systems. Thus, the cognitions and attitudes of the members of the same kinship group will tend to have internal uniformity, these will differ from those of neighboring kinship groups, and comparatively speaking, there will be even greater variation from those of a group which lives under different physical and social conditions.

### The Supernatural

Belief in the supernatural is not based on direct observation but rather on cognitive experiences that transcend the immediate, observable world. Experiences in this sphere depend mainly on emotions rather than logic and can be divided into sacred beliefs, which are associated with a deity, and non-sacred beliefs. A good illustration of non-sacred supernatural beliefs can again be found in Camara Laye's writings about his childhood learning experiences in regard to snakes.

In Camara Laye's village there were different types of snakes; all except one were killed. "One type in particular ... a little snake, black with a strikingly marked body" evoked awe, respect, and reverence in both man and women. The boy's mother forbade him to "ever interfere with it," while his father had to deliberate whether the time was "a little too soon to confide such a secret [about the nature of the snake] to a twelve year-old boy." The father spoke to his son about the snake for "the first and last time." He told his young son how he had first encountered the snake, how the snake visited him in a dream and revealed its role as the guardian of their people, and how his success as a goldsmith was due to the snake's "guiding spirit."

The solemnity of the occasion and the reverence and endearment with which the father and mother treated the matter generated an emotion which was completely different from that associated with other types of snakes. The truth about that snake was to be divulged only to mature, trustworthy persons. The impact of the situation led Camara Laye to total and unquestioning acceptance of the qualities of the snake and of its significance for the Malinke.

Yet, a number of years later, he writes, "But what exactly was a 'guiding spirit'? What were these guiding spirits that I encountered almost everywhere, forbidding one thing, commanding another? I could not understand it at all, <p. 213>

though their presence surrounded me as I grew to manhood." Under these conditions the child not only learned about a specific type of snake, he also became cognizant of either its danger or its supernatural qualities. Each situation was charged with emotions expressed in the reactions of adults, how they felt, what they said and did. In the first case it was clearly a situation of fear and defensive action, while in the second it was one of reverence and protection.

Similarly, with a reference to "souls and ancestors," the Tiv believe that every man has a *jijingi* that is manifest in his shadow and in his reflection in water or a mirror. As noted earlier, however, the Tiv believe that dead men cast no shadows; the *jijingi* departs at death. If the shadow of a corpse is pointed out to them, they say solemnly that this is not a *jijingi* any longer, it is merely his *mure*, which is the word for the shadow of a tree or an inanimate object. For the Tiv, this belief is not a subject for proof or disproof through verifiable evidence, it is accepted as a matter of unquestionable faith. Thus, when they were told that a ghost was a dead man's shadow, they readily dismissed the claim and considered it similar to the "fancies of the young."<sup>8</sup>

When a number of beliefs and associated practices cohere around an object that is considered to be supernatural, they form what is usually referred to as a cult. A cult institution may be defined as a set of rituals all revolving around a common cognitive element, all justified by a set of interconnected beliefs and attitudes, and all supported by the same social group. These include rituals in honor of beings and forces which are not worshipped. Cults are thus associated with the supernatural but are not necessarily derived from the sacred.

Cults also develop around animals, plants, or other natural objects. Among the Malinke, the belief and practices associated with the snake, the guiding spirit, may be viewed as a snake cult, but this cult does not stem from institutionalized religious drama. Formal Islam, the religion of Camara Laye's family, does not recognize the snake as a guiding spirit or as a supernatural being.

Associated with this concept of cults are African attitudes toward the dead. These practices and beliefs have often been called ancestor worship by outsiders. In many cases, however, this is a misnomer. Although dead ancestors are feared, placated through food offerings and rituals, or simply revered, they are normally not deified or worshipped. These practices and attitudes simply constitute a cult.

### **The Nature of African Religion**

Studies on African traditional religions have been largely undertaken by scholars whose orientations were guided either by their own religious perspectives--<p. 214> Judaism, Christianity, Islam--or by evolutionary theories presupposing the "primitiveness" of African religious systems. A Nigerian scholar at the University of Ibadan points out that a great many non-African scholars who write about African traditional religion have failed to comprehend its nature. They mistook "the appearance of reality," "confused religions with other aspects of culture," and reflected "the ever-menacing habit of biased comparisons" between African religions and their own. African religions should be studied with "openness," "sympathy," and "reverence".<sup>9</sup> The latter, reverence, is perhaps the most difficult for outsiders to achieve, for it necessitates the presence of the same emotional foundation that the believer experiences within the context of his own religion. These emotions are mostly acquired through the long process of acculturation, the development over a period of time of the world view associated with an individual's culture.

In its most basic form, a religion is a system of socially shared beliefs and attitudes toward sacred, supernatural entities and forces. Deities and associated concepts are at the center of religious belief systems. A number of universal categories of religious behavior may be identified: belief in supernatural beings and forces; belief in the existence of one or more deities; prayer which addresses the supernatural; physiological exercises; reciting the sacred code; *mana*, or touching things for their desirable qualities; *taboo*, or not touching things to avoid an automatic penalty; feasts; sacrifices; and congregations.<sup>10</sup> All religions, including those of Africa, manifest most of these categories.

### **African conceptions of God**

A belief system which does not recognize a deity may not be considered a religion. The characteristics of a deity are central in a religious belief system. Religions are readily perceived as either monotheistic or polytheistic. In monotheism only one god is recognized, whereas in polytheism two or more deities share the power of the universe.

It is sometimes argued that the historical development of the concept of monotheism began in the northeastern corner of the African continent in Egypt as a religious revolution against the worship of numerous gods. This monotheistic dogma was preached by Ikhnaton (Amenhotep IV) but collapsed, at least as the formal religion of the state, shortly after it had been instituted. It was the Hebrew form of monotheism that developed into the three major monotheistic religions--Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Many students of African belief systems differentiate between "God" and <p. 215> deities and see African religions as essentially monotheistic. For example, the term "God" has been limited by one scholar to the supreme creating and supernatural entity. This distinction is made in a number of African languages which differentiate between the Supreme Deity and lesser entities. The Supreme Deity in African belief systems may be viewed as paralleling "Elohim," "Jehovah" and "Allah," whereas "deities" may be compared to lesser or minor supernatural entities such as angels, and the devil and saints in monotheistic religions. For Africans, it is argued, the Supreme Deity is "real, unique, the absolute controller of the universe," and "God is one, the only God of the whole universe."<sup>11</sup> Although each of these attributes of the Supreme Being appears in a number of African religions they may not all be present together. However, African religions need not share the same image of God as do Christians in order for them to experience the same type of emotions in relation to God. For example, a great many African religions have what theologians call an *otiose* God. According to this concept, God created the world and everything in it, then withdrew and left men to run their own affairs. The Tiv of Nigeria, the Mende of Sierra Leone, and the Nuba of Sudan are among the several African groups who share this belief.

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In actual practice, monotheism in its strictest sense is an ideal. Although all three Semitic religions attribute creation and control of the universe to a single god, all, as practiced by their adherents, assign supernatural functions to other spiritual entities.

Traditional African religions recognize a number of major deities who control nature and other significant aspects of human existence. The Kung, for example, seem to have believed in a protagonist who had supernatural powers but who looked and acted like men on earth. "The Kung claim that this old protagonist and the great god of their present belief are one and the same ...."<sup>12</sup> Currently, however, they believe in the existence of two gods: a great god who lives in the eastern sky where the sun rises and a lesser god who lives in the western sky where the sun sets. The Mbuti pygmies recognize the forest or a forest deity as the main force which shapes their world. The Kalenjin of East Africa have a limited number of gods: the god of rain, who inhabits the clouds; the god of destruction, who inhabits the dark places; the god of beauty, who inhabits the plains; the god of the underworld and good fortune; and the god of kindness, who inhabits the sky.<sup>13</sup>

Other African groups acknowledge many deities. The Yoruba of southern Nigeria are reported to have a pantheon of several hundred deities, which are called *orishas*. The individual Yoruba does not necessarily know all of them.

<p. 216> Each *orisha* has his or her own special power and domain and reflects some aspect of the diversity of the Yoruba environment, of technological abilities, or of economic institutions. For example, Olorun, whose name means Owner of the Sky, the Supreme Deity who rules over both heavens and earth, is the Creator and the Lord. Orunmila, the eldest son of Olorun, is the all-knowing *orisha*; he has the authority to speak to humans, particularly diviners, and to reveal the plans of Olorun. Other examples of lesser deities are Ogun, the deity of iron and protector of hunters, blacksmiths, warriors, and more recently, truck drivers and even surgeons--all those to whom iron is of particular importance; Eshu, deity of confusion and chance, who confuses and misleads people (under Christian influence he has become equated with the Devil), is responsible for carrying messages and sacrifices from humans to the sky deity; Shango is the deity of thunder and lightning; Oshun, a female deity, is one of Shango's wives and is herself the deity of the Oshun River; Orisha-Oko is the deity of agriculture and the patron of farmers; and Sonponno is the deity of smallpox and other diseases.<sup>14</sup>

The nature of the deity as perceived by believers guides their actions toward it. In the ancient Middle East, female deities shared supernatural powers with male deities. However, since the introduction of Semitic monotheism, a single masculine god replaced all other deities in formal religious dogma. In a broader context, some deified humans, commonly referred to as saints, are females. African traditional religions seem to manifest the same dominance of a supreme masculine deity as do Semite monotheistic religions. This is particularly true with reference to the Creator. "Whereas in most of Africa, God is conceived in masculine terms, there are localities where the deity is thought of and spoken of in feminine terms."<sup>15</sup>

Religions is often identified by its functions. Answering perplexing questions, justifying existing social institutions, and reinforcing social and cultural values are among the most important. The crucial issues of creation, the nature of the world, the origin of social practices, the reason for their existence, and the necessity for their preservation are addressed and answered by a religion. Such issues are beyond immediate and empirically verifiable information.

Religious dogma provides answers that are *non*-rationally accepted as a matter of faith. For example, it is the Creator who made all things the way they are. Semitic monotheism instructs its followers that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. He created Adam and, out of his rib, Eve. Through Eve's suggestions these first humans disobeyed God and were cast out of Paradise. African traditional religions also attribute creation to a Creator <p. 217> who is differentiated from other deities. For the Kung:

The great god is the creator of all things. He created himself and named himself. He then created the lesser gods and a wife for each of them. The wives bore him children. The great god gave names to all these beings ... From the beginning he created men and women to be mortal. When mortals die he takes their spirits to the place where he lives in the eastern sky ...

The great god gave men bows and arrows and poison and digging sticks and taught them to shoot animals and dig for food. Everything men know he taught them.<sup>16</sup>

The interconnection between beliefs and practices is evident in *all* religions. For the Mbuti pygmies, when a crisis such as sickness or lack of success in hunting arises, it is seen to be caused by a lack of benevolence, rather than by evil forces. After secular (nonreligious) solutions are exhausted, the Mbuti resort to an elaborate ritual, the *molimo*. Through

song and dances, the *molimo* is addressed to the forest, soliciting the aid of a "benevolent forest deity." The purpose of the ritual is simply to attract the attention of the deity (the forest), who is benevolent. Similarly, initiation rituals, *elima*, require close contact with the forest. In the initiation of a young boy into manhood, scarification of the forehead and the use of a healing remedy made from forest plants are required. This is viewed as "visible physical evidence of the forest in the body of man."<sup>17</sup>

The account of creation in the Dogon Upper Volta illustrates how a practice such as female excision is inseparable from the Dogon concept of God and creation. The god, Amma, created the sun, moon, and earth. He was lonely and drew near to the female earth to unite himself with it. His passage was barred by a red termite hill, but he cut it down and the union was completed. This obstacle made the union defective, however, and a jackal was born. Further union, though, resulted in the birth of twins called Nummo.

The Nummo twins were disturbed by the nakedness of their mother, Earth, and clothed her with plants. The deceitful jackal then seized his mother's skirt and defiled her. Because of this, Amma decided to create live beings without Earth, and the Nummo twins, fearing that birth twins might disappear, drew a male and female outline on the ground, one on top of the other. "And so it was, and has been ever since, that every human being has two souls at first; man is bi-sexual. But a man's female soul is removed at circumcision, when he becomes a true man, and the corresponding event happens to a woman at excision."<sup>18</sup>

<p. 218> As in any religious system, the Dogon account, among other things, explains and validates social and cultural beliefs and institutions: the act of creation, the role of the jackal as the anti-God, and the necessity of male circumcision and female excision. Each one of these aspects is interconnected with all the others. Attempts to change one aspect of the belief system are resisted by other components, which will also indirectly come under attack. Generally speaking, the systemic qualities of a religion make the introduction of new information or the alteration of one aspect of the system extremely difficult without undermining the whole. To suggest to a Dogon that female excision is an inadvisable practice is to put the very concept of God and creation under attack.

### **Symbolic Representation**

Symbolism is of great significance in the practice of religious belief. It is not the idea, the act, the place, or the time in itself that is significant, but its symbolic association within the system as a whole and the emotions that it may evoke.

Attitudes of reverence develop toward all elements of the religious cognitive system. These include the *verbal* medium of communicating with God, the prayer or hymn, whether it is the Christian Lord's Prayer or the Yoruba Hymn to Eshu; *bodily movements* symbolizing religious functions, whether the making of the cross, the way Muslims kneel in prayer, or an African ritual dance; *insignias*, whether the Star of David for the Jews, the Crescent for the Muslims, or the Golden Stool for the Ashanti; *places*, whether it is Jerusalem for the three Semitic religions, or Kere-Nyage (Mount Kenya, the abode of Mogai, the Lord of Nature and the Divider of the Universe) for the Kikuyu; *time*, whether it is the Sabbath for Jews and Christians or the fifth day (the day of worship after the four days of creation and hence a week of four days) for the Yoruba. All these elements are among the significant components of a religious belief system and help to reinforce the devotion of its adherents.

### **Conclusion**

Although religions may seem different, and indeed do differ in details, they address the same basic issues, perform the same functions for individuals and for the group, and have their roots in human emotions. Thus, even though there are different religions, there is only one type of religious experience. Religion is an important and central component of the world view of individuals and of groups. It can be understood only in the context of specific emotional and environmental systems.

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### **NOTES**

1 See Lorna Marshall, "The Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert," in *Peoples of Africa*, ed. James L. Gibbs, Jr. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), pp. 243-278.

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2. Colin M. Turnbull, *The Forest People* (New York: Clarion, 1962), esp. pp. 92, 228; see also Turnbull, "The Mbuti Pygmies of the Congo," in *Peoples of Africa*, pp. 281-317, p. 308.
3. Laura Bohannon, "Hamlet and the Tiv," *Psychology Today*, vol. 9, no. 2 (July 1975) pp. 62-66, p. 63.
4. Camara Laye, *The Dark Child* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), p. 18.
5. Meyer Fortes, "Kinship and Marriage Among the Ashanti" in *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, ed. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and D. Forde (London: Oxford University Press, 1950) pp. 252-284, p. 275.
6. Laye, *The Dark Child*, pp. 22-23.
7. Paul Bohannon, "The Tiv of Nigeria," in *Peoples of Africa*, pp. 515-546, p. 538.
8. Laura Bohannon, "Hamlet and the Tiv," p. 63.
9. E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1975), pp. 16-21.
10. See Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Religion: An Anthropological View* (New York: Random House, 1966), esp. pp. 52-74.
11. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, p. 149-165.
12. Marshall, "The Kung Bushmen....," pp. 269-270.
13. Taban Lo Liyong, ed., *Popular Culture of East Africa*, (Nairobi: Longman, 1972), pp. 31-32.
14. See Harold Courlander, *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes* (Greenwich, Conn., Fawcett, 1973).
15. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, p. 149.
16. Marshall, "The Kung Bushmen ....," p. 269, see also her "Kung Bushman Religious Beliefs," *Africa*, vol. 32, no. 3 (1962), pp. 221-252, esp. p. 223.
17. Turnbull, "The Mbuti....," p. 307.
18. Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Mythology*, (London: Hamlyn, 1967), pp. 23-24.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING